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ABSTRACT

The importance of understanding the manner in which the desire to buy arises in buyers has been neglected in the study of consumer psychology. This report identifies those few research projects which have studied the origins of consumer motivation and describes a phenomenologically-guided investigation which studied individuals' desires to purchase a car. Volunteer participants were asked to describe in writing the process through which they began to desire an automobile. They were then orally interviewed and each case was separately analyzed. The phenomenon of the concept of "lack" is explored, and two case studies are analyzed in order to determine the circumstances in which individuals believe they have experienced negative situations because they lack car ownership. Findings indicate that the more possessions an individual owns, the more things that a person believes they lack or need and that the emergence of desire to purchase an item is based upon a person's experiencing a "lack" situation. (JHP)

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GETTING THERE:
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CONTEXTS OF CAR BUYING

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GETTING THERE: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CONTEXTS OF CAR BUYING

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The aim of this paper is to explicate the genesis and trajectory of awareness of the lack of an appropriate possession as this awareness arises from one's previous embeddedness within a taken for granted world. That is, we want to clarify the manner in which desire arises in the experience of the potential buyer. The path of desire we intend to render explicit is a process usually lived through implcitly. Because its origins are so highly implicit, its mportance to consumer psychology has been neglected. Consuming is usually studied behavioristically through a focus on buying behavior, or cognitively through a focus on the information processes of te buying decision. But buying is not an isolated event. Rather, it is a node within a larger temporal unfolding that began with the previous emergence of a desire for that which is bought, and ends when the bought is finally integrated through a subsequent process of ownership. If this initial emergence of desire is noted at all, it is typically conceptualized as an artifact of a synthetic advertising process that created it. Even if that were often the case, it nevertheless constitutes negligent theorizing -- and marketing -- to overlook the prevailing and primordial context out of which that desire may arise or be elicited. Either way, when consuming is conceptualized as beginning with an already explicit desire to buy, it is torn from its origins that the process of its nascence must forever after remain concealed.

A few consumer research studies have been sensitive to these origins of consumer motivation. Fennell (1986) has framed the issue well. She insists that in order to understand consumer behavior, one must first examine the previous state of affairs the consumer's behavior is attempting to change --

what she calls the antecedents of individual action. Likewise, Barrell and Waters (1980) list the "awareness of need/desire" as one of the six factors affecting concsumer motivation. They note:

> Emergence of an awareness of a need or desire appears to be the most fundamental of all the aspects of consumer motivation. This is the phase of the cycle of consumer behavior when the initial thoughts about consumption occur. Nothing happens without such thoughts. (Barrell & Waters, 1980, p. 5)

Unfortunately, the overall goal of their research lay in another direction and so, after noting the importance of this initial emergence of desire, they did not explicate it further. Another study which made contact with this phenomenon was Wertz and Greenhut's (1985) investigation of buying. Within the larger scope of their findings, they did include a brief description of "the problematic situation" against which the item to be bought presents itself as "a buyable solution." We found their analysis to be extremely helpful in opening up the implicit contours of this emergent sense. However, as the goal of their analysis was the act of buying, this emergence was viewed only in that light, and not taken up in detail on its own terms.

These studies, while helpful, need to be seen as points of departure for a more focussed analysis on the very nascence of the experience of a lack in one's world relations that can be completed by consuming. We find phenomenological methodology to b well suited to this fous. Hnce, we designed and carried out an original phenomenologically guided investigation. We elected to concentrate our research on a particular and significant case: the desire to buy a car.

Method

This study employed an empirical phenomenological methodology, basically along the lines specified for consumer psychology by Churchill and Wertz (1986) and utilized by Wertz and Greenhut (1986) in their research on buying. From volunteer participants, we obtained seven empirical descriptions of actual cases

in order to get variations concerning their ages, genders, and car buying needs. Two of the participants, Roger and Bill, are adolescents who'd recntly bought their first cars. Another, Janet, is a young married woman who bought a car for her own, so as not to have to depend on her husband. A fourth participant, Richard, is a middle aged divorced man who decided to replace his current car with a new one. The fifth, Michael, is a middle aged married man who bought a second car. Tom and Linda, the last two participants, are young adults married to each other, who recently bought a new car together.

In each case, the participants were asked first to provide a written description in response to the question: "Please describe the process by which you came to experience yourself wanting to buy a car. Please be as complete as possible, including all the initial experiences that were relevant to this desire." After receiving and sensitively reading these descriptions, we conducted interviews with the participants, as necessary. These interviews consisted of nondirective questions about the described experiences, designed to invite a more complete elaboration wherever there was any unclearness or gaps in the narration.

Next, each case was analyzed separately. This analytic process involved reflecting on the meanings lived by the partiipants. Its aim was to comprehend these meanings in relation to the ever more implicit horizons of the individual's experiential context. After each participant's individual cntext of desire was made explicit, our analysis then proceeded to an explication of th essential invariant meanings and subvariant types that are exemplified by these individual cases.

Findings

I'll present this general structure shortly, but first I'd like to concretize its high level of generality by prefacing its presentation with summaries of two of the individual cases. We selected these as type cases to

illustrate two of three subtypes we discerned in our general structure. The third subtype did not become thematic in any of our empirical cases until after the new or additional had been purchased. I'll return to this third type, and its relation to the other two, in the general structure.

The Case of Michael: This first case involves the desire to buy a second car. Michael and his wife, a middle aged couple with one young child, had only one car between them. The origin of Michael's sense of the lack of a scond car was an opening onto that possibility initiated and maintained by his wife, Sara. She repeatedly emphasized, over a period that altogether seemed like months to Michael, that they needed to get a second car. At first, Michael did not grasp here assertion as an opening onto a possible lack. Not yet experientially present to this lack himself, he replied that they did not need another car. Sara pointed out specific situations in the everyday lives wherein the lack of a second car inconvenienced them. These included situations wherein one or the other did not have a car handy when needed, or had to drive the other to or from work in order to have the car. Only after Michael latter came to experience this lack of a second car could he grasp her perspective on these situations. Not yet experiencing that lack, he doesn't really understand what she's talking about. He considered those situations exceptions, or blamed them on outside factors. As these inconvenient situations become more frequent, Michael's failure to see them from his wife's point of view becomes a reluctance to look at them in any other terms than his preferences. He preferred not to buy another car, sure that it would not be worth the money it would require. But when the inconvenient situations became an almost daily event, he too eventually did come to experience them as as a lack. His transition to that experience of lack passed first thrugh a middle stage, during which Michael ceased presupposing a second car would be too expensive to be worthwhile. Instead, he began to wonder how much it would cost. Already here we can discern the

protentions that subsequently become the desire to purchase the buyable solution. But hese are still thematized by Michael only as virtual possibilities: "I wonder how much it would cost <u>if</u> I wanted to buy a second car, which I <u>don't.</u>" He hoped a few hundred dollars. Upon asking Sara how much she supposed, he was stunned to hear a few thousand. This unexpected discrepancy provoked him to thematize concretely the sort of second car to which he was now already attuned in a virtual — and still general — way. "An old clunker, just something to get around town in." With that thematization, the virtual lack now took on the form it would have once it became an actually experienced lack. But a subsequent instantiating situation was still required for Michael to be able to personally experience that lack. The next time he did not have the car with him at work to go out to lunch, and then had to wait for a ride home as well, proided that experience.

<u>The Case of Richard:</u> In the case of Richard's second description, we have a middle aged adult who was recently divorced. He already owned a car that gave him "good service" and was still running "good." Richard's sense of a lack first emerged when he discovered his college aged son's car was "no longer running." Richard saw how hard his son was working in school, and thematized how useful a car would be to him. He began considering buying a new car and giving his son his current one. And that is what he eventually did do, but only after his initial experience of a lack manifested itself more fully. It was in the face of his son's lack that Richard began to desire a buyable solution, but that lack's emergence tuned him to a personal lack of his own. Richard recognized that he too is lacking a suitable car. He began to see that his current car is too large. It was "the family car" while he was married. Now that he is divorced, that car "no longer fits" him. It doesn't "represent" his "new life style." While his son's lack emerged directly from its given situation, Richard's growing sense of his own lack emerged as such through the

reflection cast by his discovery of his son's. This reflectivity initially showed itself as the surprising absence of a felt sense sense of attachment to his car upon his contemplating giving it to his son. This unexpected lack of attachment matters to Richard. Ever since his first car, he has always wanted his cars to "represent" or mirror his sense of himself, and bought those that did. His current car was not only the "family car" for the "family man," it was also orange, the color chosen for its symbolization of the college at which he'd been teaching. But now he's single and teaching at a different college. He's now detached from the meanings whose representations had attached him to his car. He becomes increasingly aware of the lack of representation his car any longer provides him. The prethematic roots of this emerging sense of lack thus next refer to the now deficient interface between self and car. That discord thematizes the profound changes in Richard's intimate and professional life, changes that his car does not embody. Instead, his car continues to mirror images of who he used to be but was now no longer. It is still the big, orange, family car. Grasping the failure of these old meanings to any longer "represent" him provokes Richard to thematize the sort of car that would do so: "something smaller, compact, and simple to maintain." Smaller, and more compact, like his smaller and more compact interpersonal space now that he's single again. The large amount of now "extra" space in the "family car" becomes thematic as a lack, as "unfilled space." It was only through his family that Richard filled that space. Without them it no longer connects with him, even as mirror. This emerging desire to buy a new car thus lives prenatally in Richard's deepening clarification of the lack of representativeness of his current car. While initially attuned to its now outdated meanings, a sense of who he is now beoming likewise reveals his car's lack of representativeness. He's mobile now, and likes to maneuver, to get into and out of small spaces. But his car can't. Now he's also becoming more "down home" in his new rural

environment. He likes to wear bulldog caps and go to country music festivals. And he wants to fit in, to blend with this context. But his big, orange car doesn't. He'd like to have a "subdued," almost "camoflouged" car. He did eventually buy a dark green Pinto subcompact, and so thematized a particular buyable solution to the desire born of his felt and then reflectively known lack. This final coalescence thus emerged through a process of deepening reflection that began upon perceiving another's lack of a suitable car, which referred to Richard's lack of a representative car, which referred to his current life style, which referred to an imagined car that would better represent him, which referred to the buyable solution. Hence, the buyable solution culminates, and implicates, a referential totality of meanings. This referential totality was originally lived through prereflectively. Only when the discovery of a lack provokes reflection do these meanings emerge thematically.

The general structure: The experience of the lack of a car is also, more fundamentally, the experience of the lack of lack-free existence. Lack is encountered in the face of a gap in one's world, a gap which thematizes the world of previously presupposed wholeness to be a lack-world. But this gap emerges as such upon the ground of one's network of involvements. Thus, Lack is not an objective, extrinsic entity. Rather it is a constituent of one's lived world. That is why Lack often increaes correlatively with an increase in plenty. Crudely put the more you have, th more you may lack. Starving Ethiopians don't experience the lack of a VCR, only well fed Americans do.

Faced with this gap, each person comes to their own personal experience of a lack. Precisely as the trajectory of the lack's reflection inevitably implicates the person, it is experienced with its character of my-ownness, referring to the indiviual's own particular issues. For example, in Michael's case, the lacking car was a Vehicle, something cheap to get him around town.

What was lacking for him was a pragmatic instrument needed to do certain tasks. Michael identifies himself with wha he can do, and this lack in his capacity to do bothered him. Richard, on the other hand, experienced his lacking car as the bothersome lack of a representative mirror for his way of life. Richard identifies himself throuh the traces he has of himself. Hence, a lack can emerge within either type: a lack in one's capacity to do or to have. But each charts its own course of desire to its own buyable solution. A third type case concerns settling into a car.

Discussion

There are, of course, different vantage points from which to consider the significance of these findings. One that we consider especially relevant to consumer psychology would be to discuss then in relation to the work of Martin Heidegger (c.f. Churchill, 1985). To briefly situate Heidegger's own work for those who may not be familiar with it, let me summarize a few key details. Martin Heidegger is a recently deceased German philosopher, whose key writings spanned the period from 1927 through 1959. He was the foremost student of Edmund Husserl, who founded phenomenology, both as a philosophy and as a rigorous foundation for a psychology of consciousness and experience. Heidegger appropriated the phenomenological methodology of his mentor, and applied it to ontological questions. His most important application was to the examination of the being characteristic of human being — that is, to the fundamental structures of human existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Among the findings of this study was his description of the "care structure." In Heidegger's view, human life is fundamentally characterized by the fact that we care: that things, others, our world matters to us in such a primordial way as to constitute the very essence of how we are in relation to it.

More relevant for our purposes, Heidegger analyzed this concernful relationship of person to world, and specified its modalities. He sought to

discern how the particular aspects of the world with which we are concerned disclose themselves to us in our dealings with them. In doing so, he delineated three levels of our engagement with the world. We may relate to the world as ready-to-hand, unready-to-hand, or present-at-hand.

Our ready-to-hand relationship is the most primordial form of engagement with the world. This engagement is lived prior to any reflective delineation of things as independent entities. Rather, it is our original carving out of a situation through our involvement. On he basis of the projects we are living, he world arrays itself around us according to what is relevant and useful to those projects. Heidegge describes this basic sense of the world as "equipmentality." In analyzing its appearance as such, he notes that any piece of equipment always belongs to, and refers to, a totality of equipment. Even grammatically, we cannot speak of "an equipment." This equipment totality is available to the person in a circumspective way. This is the sort of view a shoemaker has of his shop. When he needs a tool, his hand already moves to the right place. His tools are ready-to-hand. In addition, this equipment character of the world also necessarily refers to something that is to be done, and hence to the person's projects. For example, the shoemaker's hammer is for making shoes. In its ready-to-hand referential character, the hammer does not stand out thematically as a thing itself. Rather, it remains inconspicuous. The person is not oriented to the hammer as such, but to the work to be done with it. And of course the work itself also refers to an even more encompassing totality of references, including the producer, product, and user.

In this ready-to-hand mode, the world remains submerged within our practical dealing with it, within the kind of sight that is completely subtended to a praxis. Rather than explicitly showing itself, the world remains taken for granted. How then do we ever have any other relation with the world? Heidegger points out certain exception, whereby the equipment totality get explicitly

manifested differently, in ways that are not part of the ongoing flow of tool use. He notes three exemplary ways by which the world may ome to show itself as unready-to-hand. First, when a piece of equipment is enountered as unusable, it becomes conspicuous. For instance, my pen breaks in the midst of writing an important paragraph. Second, when a needed tool is discovered to be missing, those unneeded other tools now become obtrusive in their irrelevance and unhelpfulness. Third, a piece of equipment may get in my way, and so block my task at hand, requiring that it be taken care of first before I can proceed with my work.

While this unready-to-hand character still refers to the prereflective flow of my projects, it disrupts them. And through that disruption, a certain presence-at-hand begins to announce itself. We begin to thematize the piece of equipment now as an entity, a reflectively grasped thing. And specifically, one that is an emptiness, a Lack. It is when the well runs dry that we thematize water as such.

Closing thoughts

The emergence of desire for a buyable solution is founded upon the experience of a lack. This lack experience shatters the previous taken for granted presupposition of wholeness to one's life world. But the breaking out of that presupposition ends at another presupposition: that this lack can be overcome, that there is a buyable solution capable of filling that lack. Of course, this more basic presupposition is the cornerstone of contemporary advertising.

I imagine a recurring question of me when I get to the end of my paper. It is: "yes, but how can your findings help advertisers better persuade consumers to buy?" At first, I'm tempted to answer: "I'm a researcher. Isn't it enough that I did this research for you? Do I have to write your ad copy too?" But then I decide, "Noooo. There is a point to the question. Unless it matters to

marketing -- to the mediated discourse between producers and consumers -- then how does it matter?" And I do in fact hope that if marketers understand more fully the lived world of the consumer, this understanding would inform their participation as the mediators of that discourse. Indeed, I hope that it will enable them to fulfill their mission of introducing the consumer to the producer, and thereby gain "for uses access to control over what is made in their name" (Fennell, 1986). Otherwise, marketers' participation in that discourse is limited to presenting consumers with idealized -- and hence unreal -- self images. A fascinating, but essentially pathogenic task.

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